

CHAPTER
XVIII INDEX
NUMBEES

COMPAEISONS of present events with similar events in the past necessarily form a doctrinal part of all departments of inquiry in order to mark progress, stationariness or retrogression, and causation. We thus ascertain the course of population; the direction and relative volume of commerce; and the changes manifested in the various modes in which the material and moral development of men, and communities, is expressed. Comparative statistics are thus a fundamental element of all history. In the instances just cited the process is reasonably simple and direct; but in determining the related variations in the prices of commodities which constitute a nation's aggregate consumption—commodities of different descriptions, of (generally) unconnected values, and of varied degrees of necessity or importance and of consequent demand—the difficulty, arises of so selecting the materials employed in the survey as to exhibit a fair representation of the general consumption, and so devising a method of comparison as to afford a trustworthy index of real advance or decline. Eemarks upon these points will be offered as we proceed. Our object comprises (1) the relation between the prices of any commodity at different dates ; (2) that between the average prices of a group of similar commodities in any year and the prices prevailing in any anterior or subsequent year; (3) the relation between the aggregate prices of the whole of the prominent and permanent commodities included in national consumption and use, and the corresponding aggregate of prices in other years; but especially (4) it is important to select a representative and typical scale of prices of all commodities—single, grouped, and collective—and thus possess